

First record of Verreaux's Eagle *Aquila verreauxii* in Cameroon

by Frank D. Steinheimer & Svenja Sammler

Received 11 July 2006

The genus *Aquila* comprises ten species of which three are African residents and five migrate there in winter. No *Aquila* species except Verreaux's (Black) Eagle *A. verreauxii* has all-black underparts with white wing panels. Verreaux's Eagle occurs from Ethiopia, Somalia and East Africa to Cape Province and along the west coast of Africa from the Cape north to central Angola. Isolated populations occur in Israel, Egypt and on the Arabian Peninsula, and in west Sudan, eastern Chad and the northern Central African Republic (Brown *et al.* 1982).

On 2 April 2006, along the road from Nguti to Bangem near Banyang-Mbo Wildlife Sanctuary, south-west Cameroon (05°20'N, 09°28'E; 234 m), we observed an 'all-black eagle with slightly curved wings and clearly visible white patches on primaries, no visible marks in tail and yellow feet' (our field notes). The bird was discovered flying 50–60 m above ground and 20–30 m above the forest canopy. Subsequently, it circled in midday thermals (29.3°C, 75% humidity, sunshine, no wind), interrupted every 2–3 seconds by short periods of strong wingbeats. Within five minutes the bird had soared to great height and was lost to view. It was identified as an adult *A. verreauxii* immediately and compared with illustrations in Borrow & Demey (2001) during observation. Close attention was paid to the tail, which was slightly wedge-shaped, dark and lacked visible markings. The primaries were basally whitish up to half the length, then barred grey, especially on the inner feathers, and black on the distal third, forming a large pale carpal patch. Furthermore, we noted the unusual curved wing shape caused by the shorter inner primaries compared to the broader outer secondaries. When gliding the tips of primaries curved slightly upwards, and no moult in the wings or tail was evident. The head figured prominently in silhouette compared to other raptors of a similar size. Only the ventral plumage could be seen, hence the white Y-shaped mark on the mantle and uppertail-coverts typical of this species was not observed.

The distribution of Verreaux's Eagle is explicitly linked to drier habitats, preferably with annual rainfall >750 mm and/or montane areas to 5,000 m (Brown *et al.* 1982). Most records are from savannas, sparsely or patchily wooded and open mountain ranges with suitable breeding sites, i.e. rocky cliffs and outcrops (Thiollay 1994), making our record from tropical lowland forest in West Africa remarkable. Misidentification can be ruled out as observation conditions were optimal and the only other Afrotropical raptor with white panels in dark wings known from the region is Long-crested Eagle *Lophaetus occipitalis* which is much smaller and has a black-and-white barred tail. The bird showed no visible signs of captivity such as bands or feather cuts. Furthermore, no captive breeding of the species is known

from this region; the nearest zoo holding the species is in South Africa (L. Bosley & B. Huffman *in litt.* July 2006).

Our observation far from any known breeding area suggests a vagrant. Though Verreaux's Eagle is described as not migrating or wandering far (Brown *et al.* 1982), already Gargett (1990) and Thiollay (1994) stated that movements between patches of suitable habitat must occur, including over 'significant' distances. Our record might represent part of a current range extension, as suggested by recent sightings from North and Central Africa: two birds at Tenlaba, Mauritania (Salewski *et al.* 2005), one in Iherir, Algeria (Salewski *et al.* 2005), singles at Dinamou and Hombori, Mali (Lamarche 1980), and a breeding record from the Aïr Mountains, Niger (Newby *et al.* 1987). The surroundings of Banyang-Mbo offer habitats similar to those used by the species elsewhere: inselbergs, rocky hills and montane grasslands.

Acknowledgements

We greatly thank Ragnar Kinzelbach, who initiated and part-funded our study of lowland forest birds at Banyang-Mbo. Wildlife Conservation Society staff at Nguti and Limbe kindly facilitated and assisted our research. Lydia Bosley, Brent Huffman, Michel Louette and Volker Salewski provided additional information, and Ron Demey commented on an earlier draft; we gratefully acknowledge his invaluable advice.

References:

- Borrow, N. & Demey, R. 2001. *Birds of western Africa*. Christopher Helm, London.
- Brown, L. H., Urban, E. K. & Newman, K. 1982. *The birds of Africa*, vol. 1. Academic Press, London.
- Gargett, V. 1990. *The Black Eagle*. Acorn Books, Randberg.
- Lamarche, B. 1980. Liste commentée des oiseaux du Mali. *Malimbus* 2: 121–158.
- Newby, J., Grettenberger, J. & Watkins, J. 1987. The birds of the northern Aïr, Niger. *Malimbus* 9: 4–16.
- Salewski, V., Schmaljohann, H. & Herremans, M. 2005. New bird records from Mauritania. *Malimbus* 27: 19–32.
- Thiollay, J. M. 1994. Family Accipitridae (hawks and eagles). Pp. 52–205 in del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A. & Sargatal, J. (eds.) *Handbook of the birds of the world*, vol. 2. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.
- Addresses:* Frank D. Steinheimer, Scientific Associate, Bird Group, The Natural History Museum, Akeman Street, Tring, HP23 6AP, UK, e-mail: franksteinheimer@yahoo.co.uk. Svenja Sammler, Institut für Biodiversitätsforschung, Allgemeine und Spezielle Zoologie, Universität Rostock, Universitätsplatz 2, D-18055 Rostock, Germany, e-mail: svenja.sammler@uni-rostock.de